

# **Dartington, A Eulogy.**

**An Open Letter on Community,  
Pedagogy, History, and the Life and  
Death of Utopian Institutions**

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I am scarcely susceptible to what, in America at least, we call 'school spirit'. In fact I spend a large portion of my time critiquing and subverting schools, whether as a student or a member of broader communities, and attacking the state of institutional pedagogy in the West generally. I am, however, wildly devoted to the notion of *community*—of what it can mean, what it can do, and what it could become. And if I mourn now for Dartington, it is less for an institution about to die than for a community whose slow, inevitable death has just been triggered, and for an idea and a set of pedagogical strategies whose *presence* in social reality, whose living example as a way forward, is now being almost irrevocably effaced.

The question facing me now, as Dartington itself enters the final paroxysms of its death, is how best to respond—how to deliver not a simple eulogy but a call to action, and to discover what kind of action this might be. The fact of its imminent disappearance already drives a wedge into anything that I might say, and I must speak to (at least) two audiences at once: we who have known Dartington, and those who never will. I hope that the latter will forgive my beginning, as it were, in the middle of the story, and forgive my direct addresses to my fellow Dartingtonians; they are my sisters and brothers. And I trust in turn that the latter will not mind treading over some ground well-known to them, reconsidering it in the light of the moment we find ourselves in, as we have all done so often on the long trudge up and down the hill on the banks of the River Dart, as I attempt to introduce others to what *we* know so well.

A way must be found, by all of us who were there, to bridge this apparently incommunicable gap between those who were present, and those for whom this Place can only ever be absent, a *story*. It is only in this way that we can render the death of this educational dream anything but final. The attempt is wrought with difficulties, for what made Dartington *work*, when it did work, were all of the little details of life, friendship, and conversation that escape encapsulation; not the policy nor the academic structure, but the *culture* of the place; too many details, experienced in too much variety, to convey in any way but through the living of it. Yet here we are; and for each difficulty that we encounter, we must locate or construct an answer, for within a generation there will be nothing left but what *we* leave.

Of course, these difficulties *have* been bridged for 85 years, with each generation of students and faculty passing through the estate, and between the innumerable social groups, disciplines, and ideological elements which have always composed the Dartington community; and we would do well to start by examining the mechanics of this process, which might well be adapted to the situation of the institution's passing into history: If the understanding of Dartington is the outgrowth of a shared communal experience, the condensed and almost monastic daily life engendered by the collective tenure on this busy estate and the vibrant village surrounded by miles of countryside, it is an experience that has been perpetuated and shared through a culture of storytelling, an internal folklore of what Dartington has been and pointing toward what it could become, in which the physical features of the landscape and the estate have served to anchor story, to draw together memories and tales disparate in time and told by many different people. If the culture of

Dartington has always been in flux, always growing, adapting, and evolving, it has also been characterised by an essential awareness of continuity, perpetuated by the lifelong involvement of alumni who have loved the place and have regularly returned throughout the years or settled permanently in Devon and the Southwest, contributing to that growth and continuing to be changed by it. If the experience of Dartington is fractured and reflected in myriad ways by the countless creative disciplines, modes of activity, and areas of social involvement which take root there, these ways of knowing Dartington also reflect and affect each other through the essential and attentive culture of collaboration and interdisciplinarity which was fundamental to the ethos of the place. If the social landscape of Dartington has never been homogenous but always a complex network of micro-communities with different priorities, orientations, critical languages, histories, and modes of interaction, in the place of an impossible 'master history' we have countless interpersonal histories perpetuated not only within the community but within the broader communities in which, as they have left the place, Dartingtonians have made themselves indispensable

In light of this last observation, I can only begin my own evocation of the Dartington-that-was with my own experience of it, an experience to which, as I grew there, so many other experiences, stories, and awarenesses accrued. This can only be one facet of the jewel, upon which can be discerned the reflection of many others.

By the time that I moved to Dartington, I had already become aware of many of the more easily indicated elements of its heritage, suggested by the connections the Place had with Cage, Cunningham, and others involved with the Black Mountain School; with Cantsin, Home, Kantor and the Neoist network; with Stravinsky, Holst, Bryars, experimental and minimalist music; and I do not mention other points of reference of which I was then or am even now unfamiliar. But this legend alone does not do Dartington justice, for the function of the place was not to turn out 'Big Names', and those who have taught there have not done so for the purpose of feeding the culture of the art-star spectacle.

Rather, the mission of Dartington—a mission which managed, in the face of all economic, military, political and cultural vicissitudes, to survive for 85 years before being murdered by the unelected and highly-paid Trust charged with defending it—has been to generate a *culture* of engaged, powerful, ethical, collaborative experimental activity. Not a selection of icons of intellectual and creative innovation; but a cultural enclave in which intensity, energy, and rigour are the air one breathes. Over the generations a constant stream of cultural workers has emerged from Dartington, recreating in culture at large the ways of living, thinking, and *doing* that are fostered there. It is often difficult (and pointless) to tell who at Dartington is an undergraduate student, who a graduate, an alumnus, a lecturer, a native Totnesian. When in their respective roles, they use these roles to enrich each other; when stepping out of the classroom or studio, we are all simply Dartingtonians, and hierarchies disappear. The community persists, and it inhabits

the estate. No, forgive me—it inhabit-*ed* the estate.

The untranslatable *texture* of Dartington, which these convenient big names cannot suggest and which one could only experience living *in* the place, has been the most important element of its potential. It was hinted at, if nothing more, the final time that I performed in the US prior to leaving for Devon. I was performing a sound poem in a DIY house-venue in Columbus, Ohio; touring performers shared sets of harsh noise and neo-futurist plays produced out of the back seats of cars. In the course of conversation afterward, my ears pricked up at the mention of Dartington, as somebody—I no longer recall whom—described one Dartingtonian who had found a way *not only* to build a functional pipe organ entirely out of scavenged cardboard, but to make it *collapsible* in order to fit into his car, touring basement shows throughout the US, performing for his cut of a \$5 door-charge for audiences of 10 or 20 cultural iconoclasts drawn from an uneasy variety of subcultures and networks.

I still do not know this legendary musician's name, nor even how closely he resembles in actuality the story that eventually reached me. I *do* know that his story was firmly attached to a legend of Dartington within the American avant-garde network, and that this accurately suggested to me another dimension of what Dartington could stand for than what I had already heard from more 'official' sources—a glimpse into Dartington as a Place in which people could set themselves to obscure and complex tasks like this and bring them to fruition: a home for such unthinkable projects, executed with such precision, with such genuine dedication to small, generous, and radical communities.

I spent something less than two years at Dartington; and yet it is there that the majority of my deepest and most continually generative friendships have been formed. Even now, friendships and collaborative relationships continue to blossom with people I had scarcely met or only heard about during my actual time there. In my undergraduate time at an 'Art & Design' school on the same model to be found virtually everywhere in the West, it had taken years blindly working against the utterly alienating structure of the programme and the social patterns to which it gave birth (sculptors working with painters? preposterous! Freshmen talking to seniors? scandal! Genuine thought and competency of craft? utterly incompatible!), to fumblingly form even an approximation of what, now, I consider the *only real* form of friendship. Even then, we were an utter anomaly, the only such circle of friends organized around the principle of genuine intellectual engagement.

But when one came to Dartington one was thrown into the midst of a social and intellectual environment *already* in full career, populated by intermingling networks of friends and collaborators characterized not by discipline, age, or experience but by various *modes* of intensity: intersecting micro-communities in which new people entered a milieu and affected its character as others moved away, retaining a presence through repeated returns to the estate or simply through the stories carried on by their comrades. One discovered or created one's place or places within this terrain, and found that maintaining

oneself in this environment demanded from one's self a constant rigour, energy, and intransigence that became gradually internalized. With such friends, it was impossible to be satisfied with 'good enough', all self-illusions must be ripped away and dealt with, one was propelled to shed skins and grow. Surrounded by genuine *praxis*, it was impossible to settle for less.

Friendship at Dartington was not about comfort or security, though it was emphatically about solidarity. Friendship was constant challenge. It was a matter of building relationships founded upon the mutual drive to improve ourselves, personally and communally, on the constant insistence not to compromise on *any* level, and on the mutual support necessary to weather all the strains of this process. Not only creation, but *living* became something qualitatively different.

This rigour which was a part of everyday life was both intellectual and practical. When in daily contact and regular collaboration with friends mastering both the mental attitudes and the practical techniques of musical composition and performance, of choreography, of acting, of devising, of shamanism, of mime, of scoring, of publishing, of puppetry, of poetry, of dance, of organising, of singing, of linguistics and semiotics, of activism, of comedy, of meditation, and of a dozen other disciplines, sub-disciplines, specializations and practices, every gap in one's consciousness, each blind-spot in one's home discipline and weakness in one's technique of *inhabiting the world* found a remedy. A writer could understand space in a way only available through choreography, time with a sensitivity unique to music, composition with a sensibility drawn from devised theatre, the relationship between muscles and words attainable only through the synthesis of techniques of song, dance, and meditation. None of us has remained simply and merely *what we are*. And we have all been enabled to act on the world with competencies and confidence unimaginable without our time in this Place.

It goes without saying that in these conditions, intellectual inquiry was recognised and practised as genuine cultural *engagement*. In creative communities at large, what passes for 'conceptual understanding' is merely a minimal familiarity with a few 'theoretical' texts (usually secondary and derivative) from which artists draw more-or-less meaningless key-words, utterly decontextualized, which can be deployed in 'artist's statements' or interviews to ensure patrons, buyers, or funding committees that the products under consideration are infused with some vague and usually illusory 'cultural value' (in reality financial value). In the environment of Dartington's more engaged milieus, such cheap sophistry was hard-pressed to find any foothold, and whether practitioners engaged with theoretical texts or with more idiosyncratic and indirect ways of framing their activity, the guiding value was that of *rigour*. One was not searching for a trite pseudo-philosophical precept for 'explaining' or justifying a performance or action, but rather for a set of strategies through which to ask and answer the question of what the possible relationships might be of any creative activity to the social, political, phenomenological, and economic systems with which it must interact.

This is to say, in the same breath, that the discourse at Dartington approached the realm of the *ethical* to a degree scrupulously avoided at every other institution I have ever come into contact with. The world does not begin with the start of a performance, nor end with the audience's applause; nor does one's responsibility as a performer find its limit with the product that we present. There is never a time when we are not performing in and upon the world. We are, as the assumption ran in Dartington's most engaged circles, responsible for every aspect, every level of our activity's existence; and thus one common trait of the Dartingtonian is that s/he is *not* simply a performer, musician, poet, or specialist in whatever field. S/he is also, inevitably to some degree, an organizer, a publisher, a producer, an activist, a researcher, an archivist, a theorist or polemicist—whatever is necessary in order to ensure an ethical and conceptual consistency in *every* level of activity. We do not await opportunities, then avoid asking the difficult questions in order to safeguard our guilty consciences; instead, we *create* our opportunities, carving out the cultural enclaves in which we and our comrades can make, think, and live with *genuine* integrity.

The communities that we help to build, like the community from which we come, are vibrant, heterogeneous cultural spaces where people are bound together by a common spirit of inquiry and joyful experiment, not by consistencies of approach or result. The rigour that shapes our thought and determines our cultural approaches is applied equally to the *techné* of performance, to the conscious *crafting* of moments that can change the ways that people think about the world. We do not simply make 'art'; we strive to instigate denaturalizing *experiences*, to create unsettling or liberating situations, to change for seconds or for lifetimes what it means to *exist*.

What makes Dartington unique, makes it an almost legendary *place* rather than merely a 'good programme', is this distinction from the dozens of 'good programmes' from which well-educated drones emerge every year: Dartingtonians *do things*, things that those experiencing them do not forget; we do not fuck around. Drawing upon the resources of the full arsenal of specializations in *performing*, we regularly create experiences which disturb or elate people on levels and in ways that are unavailable anywhere but from this most unique and intense of communal and pedagogical atmospheres. While the broader worlds of literature, music, art, etc. become increasingly satisfied with “making statements”, presented within the insular and thoroughly alienated frameworks and structures inherited from a domesticated and commercialized society, a thin but steady stream of workers has emerged from Dartington who refuse to settle for such meaningless and careerist abstractions, and for whom an idea is meaningless until it has fundamentally transformed, at the least, some small portion of *reality*.

These are not merely creative minds theorizing and symbolizing potential points of discussion; nor are they mere artists ready for any compromise allowing them to remain within the virtual nursery of this or that 'art world', but cultural workers, effectively *acting* on the world with the radical potential of thought.

And we come now to my ambivalence concerning a slogan that I have seen tossed about while

attempting, from my distant vantage-point back in the US, to gauge what is happening there now as the death-knells set in: “DARTINGTON: A STATE OF MIND, NOT AN ESTATE IN DEVON”. Given the complex network of propaganda, double-dealing, bureaucratic obfuscation, and voluntary and legally-enforced silence that has characterized the struggle for the survival of the school since the news leak alerting us all to the treachery of a “merger” with an Art School in Cornwall, and considering even more my own physical distance from the estate and those living there for the past three years, I shall not guess at the political positioning of this slogan, nor at the current role of the slogan's apparent coiner, the Student Union, which at the beginning at least was the Trust's principal lackey, despite valiant opposition by some representatives within it. But whatever the intention, this slogan—“A STATE OF MIND, NOT AN ESTATE IN DEVON”—seems dangerously disingenuous.

Because the community of Dartington has emphatically *never* been merely “a state of mind”. It has had a concrete *existence*, it has been an organ of *action*, it has had a *body*: and that body was the Estate. Without the body, the mind withers and dies. Further: without a body, the mind would never exist at all. Something must coalesce the elements, must provide a point of reference, must glue the idea to the world, and to all of the thousands of *people*—and people are not merely “states of mind”—who make up the community, who compose the Idea, in its infinite forms, that Dartington represents. The Dartington project has never been merely ideal, it has been the ideal made *real* through its skilful introduction into the particular and the lived. It is not merely a thought, it is *embodied* thought; and this is why Dartington, as an idea which *exists*, has been doomed to a slow death.

Devoid of the estate, what is the Dartington “state of mind”? Rigour—Experimentalism—Collectivity—Interdisciplinarity—Ethics—Intellectual Adventure: so many empty words. Words that would be readily, proudly, and hypocritically ascribed to by tens of thousands of artists throughout Europe and North America who have never even examined, let alone embodied, any of these concepts. Concepts meaningless unless they are fully embodied as the fundamental groundwork upon which *any* creative practice must be built. Concepts which must be felt in the muscles and in the spaces between words. Concepts which can only be embodied and shared in a context—a *real context*—in which they are fully integrated into the *daily* life, the *collective* life, of a community. For eighty years the Estate, and the culture that has been perpetuated there, has been the material and experiential touchstone that has given these values a concrete meaning and force, binding generations of Dartingtonians whose experiences and concerns have, in every other way, been vastly different from each others'.

I have referred already to a Dartingtonian folklore, and at their most effective, Dartingtonians are not *people* so much as *characters* inhabiting the real world. Each of us has a store of memories, potential stories, of absurd actions collectively devised and prepared, legendary performances experienced, revealing encounters between Dartingtonians who have utterly embodied different approaches to Being in the world,



epic debates and discussions cutting through the established thought-forms of a group, sanguinary battles fought with each other, the administration, or simply the real world. These stories can make what Dartington was comprehensible to those who were not there, and as they accumulate, cross paths, and intersect can suggest the *world* that Dartington was. For those of us who *have* been there they reinforce our understanding of the full scope and range of what was possible, for none of us have known the whole; and it is the common touchstones—the places of the estate which are the stages for so many of these stories, as well as the common logics of action and interaction characterising the community throughout its life—that draw us together to recognise ourselves in each other. This is not merely a folklore of Dartington, for it interacts with the folklore of the estate itself, with the folklore of Totnes, and partakes of a legendary tradition stretching back into the Middle Ages and disappearing with the Saxons and Britons whose walls and forts still stretch across the estate.

This close relationship between our own folklore and that of the larger community which welcomed and supported the utopian project on the estate is most evident in the ghost stories which proliferate there, passed from townspeople to students and back, from one generation of to the next. The very physical space between the town and the estate is inhabited, we are told, by the spectral Lady in White, who if seen accompanying one on the long walk up the hill—now to the left, now to the right, defying all logic—presages madness and death within the year, as has been documented numerous times in the past 200 years. There is scarcely a Dartingtonian who has not undergone the right of passage, while stumbling over the Medieval tilting-grounds in the garden in the dead of night, of either stifling or yielding to the temptation to count the Apostle Trees outlined against the sky, which mean death if one counts the ghostly 13th tree. There is, as well, the ancient Yew tree, twining its bulk in the midst of the cemetery, which according to age-old tradition was worshipped by the Druids here before the time of the Saxons, and inside whose hollow bulk more than one of my friends has spent a chilly night. This cemetery is filled with eight centuries of Devon dead; the very first performance I saw here was an act of respect and remembrance for these forgotten inhabitants of the place, some of whom, the worn stones inform us in archaic spellings, drowned while swimming in the River Dart, as have a number of students over the past century. Students at the estate's first school began the tradition of scandalizing the town immediately upon the foundation of the colony when it was reported that one could only swim in the school's pool (now drained, inhabited by tiny toads, with excellent acoustics for sound poetry) on the *condition* that one swam nude. Eighty years later, it was still a running joke at Dartington that one could not truly call oneself a Dartingtonian until one had performed in the nude. (I confess that by this criterion, I myself am still an outsider.)

In one sense, indeed, Dartington exists in a thousand places, in the minds and activity of everyone who has passed through it over the decades; but it exists there *because* all of these people have been reformed in this one, *real* Place, the crucible in which so many individual projects of transformation have

mingled and supported each other. Certainly, not everyone has availed themselves of these opportunities, and there are plenty, perhaps a majority, for whom it has remained, and remains, merely a school. But if my analysis focuses on what was best and most effective about Dartington, it is because, at its best and most effective, the place was capable of fostering and *sustaining* a degree of activity and thought that I have seen evidence of nowhere else in Europe or America. Those who have not availed themselves of this potential (and who will not read this text anyway) are not, to my mind, Dartingtonians; they are not cultural workers in any respectable sense; they are merely *artists*.

The school itself, the programme, had its flaws, plenty of them, as every school must, and its administration has long been at odds with the culture of the place. None of us is without frustrations, and a startling number of us who have loved Dartington the most, and have most actively sought to contribute to its community and traditions, have undergone internal prosecution, lawsuits, termination, and (sometimes repeated) expulsion from the programme; we shall never know the number of non-disclosure agreements that have been forced upon these people in preparation for the Trust's coup d'etat. I myself am no exception, as is well known; yet in nearly every instance the love for Dartington persists despite these struggles, our involvement in the community persists or is even redoubled. This affirms what, optimistically, the coiners of the slogan I have mentioned *may* be trying to get at: Dartington is much more than a school, is in fact something *other than* the school. But nonetheless it cannot exist *without* the school *and* the estate.

The community's culture of challenge, collaboration, and intensity, providing the communal and intellectual touchstone that binds all of the disparate people that the Place has touched, has been the principle thread of my text; but it should be added that the existence of the school *as* school, its very institutional status, while responsible for most of the inflexibility and short-sightedness that limited the promise of the project and which, in the end, contributed most to its demise, was also the *practical* factor which enabled that community to form and to perpetuate itself. The school provided the pretext for so many of us to assemble from all over the world; it supplied us with the intellectual tools with which our own discourses could be built outside the programme proper; it offered a way for most (at least those within the EU, not to mention those who taught there) to financially support themselves during their tenure there; and it served as an 'official' face of the community to interact in necessary ways with the various forms of Power and ensure the community's sustainability in the face of political pressures and changes—at least until this responsibility was co-opted by the Trust as a pretext for selling the student body to Falmouth.

Let us not forget that the Dartington project does not begin or end with the school; the school has always been part of a larger project, and DCA is not the first school that the Trust (secretive and unelected, appointed for life from within its own insular ranks) has driven from the estate in order to turn a profit. The true charter of Dartington, the very reason that the Estate was founded in 1925, was to establish a radical approach to rural regeneration in all of its dimensions: cultural, economic, and ecological. DCA represented

only one aspect of this larger project, and was to have worked in close union with all of the other bodies operating on the estate.

This project was a virtually uncontested success that grew into its own over generations, supported even by Conservative MPs, no doubt suspicious of its cultural programme, as vital to the economic well-being of the region. An island of experimental activity surrounded by agricultural seas from which it drew physical and intellectual sustenance, situated between the cities of Plymouth, Exeter, and Bristol in what not only conventional capitalist economic pundits but traditionally-trained 'artists' would consider an un-hip dead space, Dartington was a generative 'no-place' or utopia from which new creative impulses continually emerged, a source of constant vitality with an important role in all of the towns and cities of Southwest England.

By the time that I arrived at Dartington the internal relationships between the various components of the estate had already eroded under decades of complex internal politics, as the Trust had gradually but successfully waged a divide-and-conquer campaign against the various arms of the project supposedly under its protection. In 1987, the equally progressive high school at Dartington was closed down by a Trust-hired hatchet-man amidst fierce protest by alumni, closely foreshadowing the way in which the college would eventually be brought down; while around the same time the first attempt on the college itself was made, only staved off by bitter opposition from students, faculty, and townspeople culminating in an effigy of the president being burned in the courtyard of the Great Hall. This concerted effort saved the school for another two decades, until the struggle could be partially forgotten with the passing of that generation of students and faculty, the student union could be bought off, the teachers' union intimidated, and a new hatchet-man brought in. Meanwhile the relationships between the various parts of the Dartington project continued to deteriorate, so that on the second attempt the Trust could be ensured that the bulk of students at DCA would feel little loyalty to the larger utopian project of the Estate or its very specific relationship to the Devon community ("...not an Estate in Devon"), and could depend upon the complicity of Schumacher College, the last remaining school on the estate, which doubtless thought to profit by the ejection of DCA but whose ecological project, now isolated and with its betrayed allies shoved out of the way, is likely to be the next victim.

This increasing alienation from the comprehensive social project that Dartington represents laid the groundwork for the eventual "merger", epitomising as it does the social and ethical myopia, the bureaucratic and conceptual alienation that is the basis of the cookie-cutter 'Art and Design' model which awaits the final generation of Dartingtonians at their new institution in Cornwall.

Over the generations, Dartington has become a part of Totnes. If there has been a tradition of scandalizing the town, it is that of good-natured ribbing of friends long grown accustomed to each others' quirks; and the lines have become porous and fluid between native Totnesians, students, faculty, the many

alumni who have settled there, and other iconoclasts who have made the town their home because of the vibrant civic culture that the school enabled, constantly refreshed and renewed by each generation of students. As shown by the protests both of 20 years ago and of five years ago (when due to the Student Union's complicity with the Trust the townspeople made greater efforts than the student body to save the school), the people of Totnes consider the school and the estate itself a part of themselves, a vital part of their own civic identity.

This is not a normal state of affairs. In most rural schools that I have encountered—schools with much more traditional student bodies—students are seen as arrogant interlopers, and act like interlopers as well, dismissing the people who host them as ignorant 'locals', never truly living in the place they are in. In every school I have encountered in an urban setting—whether major cities or small—the students are used as the pawns of real-estate developers, in most cases being used to obliviously force out poor or immigrant neighbourhoods in order to pave the way for trendy and lucrative upper-class establishments and housing. In order for these plans to run smoothly, any relationship between students and the neighbourhood is regulated in the form of officially-promulgated 'outreach programmes' which are condescending and alienating in their very conception, bypassing any encouragement for genuine immersion or civic duty toward the neighbourhood, maintaining the division between 'student' and 'resident' as if it were natural. I cannot speak to the specific conditions in Falmouth; but I do know that their website says nothing about the local community or the tradition of the school, and a great deal about the multi-million quid facilities being built there by developers.

I suspect that many Dartingtonians do not fully appreciate the deep qualitative difference between education as they have known it here and 'art' education as it exists nearly everywhere else in the Western world. Many graduate students, having been raised in programmes of such amoral alienation, appeared to have been unable even to recognize anything genuine, more concerned with the status that a Dartington degree could give them in the commercial gallery or publishing worlds than with the opportunity for *real* growth offered by the place; fortunately for the rest of us many of them spent most of their time in London or elsewhere with their careerist heads planted in the sand, out of our hair (some, not surprisingly, have since taken jobs at Falmouth). Others came to Dartington from other disciplines, less intellectually compromised in their teaching than 'the arts'. Many undergraduates have never known anything *but* Dartington, where lecturers worked side by side with students, anyone within the community might collaborate with anyone else, people rarely asked or cared 'what department' one was in, students of all stripes regularly shared skills and perspectives through regular collaboration and student-taught workshops, and nearly everybody supported anything that was vital, challenging, and effective. It was therefore easy to recognize its shortcomings without realizing that, anywhere else, we would have been taught to regard these

faults as benefits. It seems worthwhile to provide a sketch of the mainstream educational world to which the Dartington project has been sacrificed—for their benefit, as well as for those who, having never known anything *but* the simulacrum of pedagogy known as 'art school', have never seen it critiqued, and must be shown that alternatives have existed, and could be built again.

The parasitic relationships that most of these institutions have with the communities which they inhabit and destroy is reflected by their internal disconnections, which prepare their students for a lifetime of solipsistic social amorality. Specializations are not treated, as at Dartington, as so many focal points of skillsets and concerns, all of which are assumed to overlap and which therefore ought to be shared by all in the creation of collaborative relationships and projects indefinable in their final states by any single discipline. Rather, specializations are treated as *domains*, which must like nation-states defend their borders against each other, struggling over resources and capital, as one department or another gains or loses power within the bureaucratic structure of the school in their endless squabbles which use the language of stupid intellectual hierarchies but centre, in practice, around the distribution of tenure positions and money from the central coffer. This attitude, rooted in the institutional structure designed for the training of businessmen, naturally orients the social attitudes of students, for whom specializations stand for future job, publication, or exhibition opportunities, chances to prove one's ascendancy in some isolated niche of the artistic or academic establishment; practitioners of various disciplines band together, either oblivious to the narrow horizons of *any* one field on its own or else proud of their bullheaded refusal to understand other 'inferior' or at least irrelevant ways of approaching things.

Graduate students, similarly jockeying for teaching assistantships, potential adjunct faculty positions, and various other resumé points, adopt a superior attitude to the younger or less experienced students who it is their supposed duty to share their experience with, and interact only in classroom settings, in ways which they are confident will preserve their hierarchical place 'above' the undergraduate class. Collaboration and friendship rarely crosses this boundary, especially when untainted by sycophancy. Undergraduates in turn take up this cue, and genuine relationships between first, second, third, and fourth-year undergraduates becomes equally taboo. The end result is that nobody truly grows or learns anything not on the syllabi of the various courses, as students close themselves off to learning from their younger colleagues and have no opportunity for genuine exchange with those more experienced than themselves.

In this environment, students never come to know the intricate lessons of *how* to learn, how to use what they learn in coursework to change the rest of their lives, how to connect the discourse and theory that they encounter in coursework (if they do indeed encounter it) to do any more than justify their practice in the way necessary to get a passing grade from an instructor more concerned with maintaining numbers in his or her department than with the intellectual growth of the student. Thought becomes something to be tagged on to work which, in reality, has no reason for existing other than that there is an 'art world', 'literary

world', 'theatre world', etc. that is out there ready to consume it. These vital lessons, from which any ethical positioning of creative production must grow, can only be learned outside the classroom, can only be passed on by generous collaboration with more experienced practitioners, and can only be contextualized among a full range of perspectives on what cultural activity can look like. None of these things are encouraged by 'art schools,' structured as they are around the priorities of rabid careerism, hierarchical status, statistical number-crunching, and interdisciplinary (interdepartmental) competition.

The results are schools in which students merely represent so many counters in the career-games of their faculty and graduate students, so many potential 'industry jobs' to be boasted of by school recruiters as they roam the country throwing leashes around the necks of eager, idealistic young men and women about to be led to the artist-factory which, in order to remain 'competitive in today's art market' or 'creative industries' is qualitatively interchangeable with every other, allowing only the variations afforded by a 'good' teacher here or there or a batch of new computers. The social structures in which these students find themselves when not in class are hopeless fractured, insular, and devoid of any real purpose, for not only have students been denied the intellectual conditions to conceive and carry out meaningful lifetime projects, they have not even been introduced to the idea that such long-sighted challenges can exist and be addressed. Intellectual rigour, any form of thought that might *orient* activity rather than merely be used to 'interpret' individual pieces or bodies of work, has been left out of the classroom and certainly can find no foothold in what is now looked at as students' "off-time", which is instead devoted to mindless diversion and partying, in which simply watching an occasional art-film with a glass of wine is looked at as a sign of intellectual focus and superiority. Paradoxically, this complete fracturing of the social dimension of education results in a conceptual and creative uniformity that goes unnoticed by practitioners only because they are trained, without even knowing it, never to look outside the tiny cultural boxes in which they live. Participation in this homogenization, which differs only superficially from one discipline to the next, is after all necessary in order to advance one's place within the system that it creates.

In the conceptual and ethical vacuum thus created, whatever idealistic drive or insistent iconoclasm may first have led the student toward 'the arts' is slowly buried under the barrage of easy answers and cultivated blind-spots that both instructors and peers are willing to settle for, and themselves prey to, hemmed in by a series of compromises perpetuated in favour of 'getting exposure', then 'getting along', and finally 'getting a gallery/publisher/grant'—anything to avoid actually *working* for a living. Soon, if anything remains of this spirit, it has been reduced to a merely spectacular state, a studied set of poses and key 'conceptual' phrases, an affectation of integrity or social responsibility that allows one to look down upon one's fellow capitalists and bureaucrats for their 'crass materialism' while insuring the cultural capital necessary to continue being offered their money, accolades, and awards. At this point, the artist has earned the right to take up their place as lecturer at the top of the art-school hierarchy in which, some time ago,

they entered at the bottom as a student full of 'unrealistic' hopes and dreams. It little matters which art school in Britain, Europe, or America they step into—they have been there before, they know the drill full well. The social function of the 'art school'—something that Dartington was *not*, and which at its best it trained students to work *against*—comes down to this: to keep middle-class kids from ever having to work a real job or dirty their hands. Students never *really* leave art school, and yet never *really* begin to learn.

One pertinent example that might be mentioned, and at some point examined further, is Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. In the 1960s and '70s, art programmes administered by several different associated colleges, and thus relatively free of contaminating internecine struggles, worked closely together, encouraging the cross-pollination of the various creative approaches and emphases characterising each programme. Under the stewardship of Fluxus co-founder Geoffrey Hendricks, Black Mountain alumnus Alan Kaprow, and others, who managed miraculously to open and sustain a utopian space within the adverse structure of a university, the mixed milieu that resulted fostered an atmosphere of interdisciplinary and collaborative adventure rare in a state school, and for two decades made New Brunswick an experimental testing-ground vital to the development of American Fluxus, Happenings, and public and interventionary performance. The death-knell for this community was sounded when the art programmes of the Fine Arts, Liberal Arts, and Science colleges were consolidated under the single administrative unit of Mason Gross College of Arts; reorganized as a traditional Art School under the hegemonic control of a president appointed by a board unconcerned with any cultural mandate, a gradual degeneration of both the academic programme and the community itself ensued. The visual arts campus was relocated away from the schools of music and theatre, in a building shared with the Department of Urban Development for which a score of homes and local businesses were forced out by the civic government as part of a city-wide campaign of racist and classist gentrification, and soon all academic and social connection between disciplines ceased; dedicated faculty gradually gave way to overpaid 'art star' instructors who lived an hour away in New York city, missed half of their own classes, and could not remember their students' names; in the interdepartmental squabbling over funds and tenure, faculty were turned against each other and their students languished in intellectual apathy; alienation of every kind proliferated. The departments that won these feudal wars were those capable of scoring adverts in pseudo-intellectual sales catalogues such as *ArtForum* and fetching large prices from the upper bourgeoisie in galleries, and performance of any kind eventually disappeared entirely from the landscape. Students, devoid of any other example, have taken the cue from their insipid and self-serving faculty, and the programme is now a sad and gutted husk of its inspiring past, the 'community' no longer even worthy of the name.

It is true that the structure of Dartington's programme—while considerably more adaptable than traditional 'art schools'—lagged far behind the culture of the place, and behind most of what was being taught there. To the extent that the academic organization echoed traditional art schools, the threat of

contamination existed, combated by the opposing culture of the estate that surrounded it, in which the faculty were full participants. Certainly inter- and intra-departmental problems did exist, though faculty had the decency and integrity not to carry these disputes into their teaching, or contaminate the culture of the place. And while the teaching was, in my experience at least, at a *much* higher calibre than anywhere else I am familiar with in terms of both intellectual rigour and genuine concern and responsiveness to students' individual missions (not to mention willingness to stand by and support students when under attack), it is true as in any programme that this quality varied from lecturer to lecturer, department to department, from time to time. To a certain extent I was luckier than many. But in a 'move' to Falmouth or *any* remotely traditional 'art school', this inherently fallible and easily contaminated academic structure is *all* that can be transplanted (not to mention the large proportion of the most dedicated faculty who, knowing what is in store there and having built lives and families in Devon, will not be following the sold-off student body, opting instead to found new projects with integrity elsewhere). I leave aside the radically different canons and concerns taught at Dartington, which may or may not survive for a few years at Falmouth but which in any case will *act* in a fundamentally different way in the atmosphere of an Art School. The surrounding culture that relativized the academic programme, corrected its imperfections, and positioned its failings as issues to be railed *against* rather than *internalized* and perpetuated—i.e., what Dartington *really* was—dies with the estate.

Let me reiterate what this entire text so far has attempted to imply:

This is *not* a merger. The final generation of students have been *sold* to Falmouth, eager to secure its recent accreditation through the murder of another school and the destruction of a vibrant community.

Dartington *will not* continue, could *never* continue in *any* other Place.

Dartington is dead. The Estate is its corpse. To pretend otherwise is to insult and betray everything that Dartington has ever been and done, to render it impotent forever.

Let us have the decency to shed our tears over its casket, and not piss on its unmarked grave.

If Dartington's legacy, its memory, is to have any continued *value* beyond the deep nostalgia of those of us who were there—if it is to continue to *act* in the world even in death, to affect those who *can* never be there, we must find ways to continue Dartington *without* a Place, *without* a body, we must inject it into the bloodstream of all of the radical communities throughout the world that would not be what they are without its contribution, direct or indirect; it must become a meme.

I would suggest that the most appropriate and noble deployment of the power that Dartington might



*still* possess, if we as a community can find ways to unlock it, would be to continue to combat in death, as it did in life, the alienating, stultifying, irresponsible model of mainstream creative pedagogy that I have outlined above. *No more* generations of cultural workers will issue from the crucible on the banks of the Dart, fully armed with the physical and analytic techniques of transformatory will; there shall be *no more* centre where we might rally, no home to which we might return. But in the death of the body, the absence of a centre, the ghost might reappear anywhere, everywhere, diffused in force but with the persistence of a haunting. We must learn to evoke Dartington's ghost wherever and whenever it is called for—to evoke it in uncanny detail, its lineaments and its ways, such that it may affect the world around it, if only for brief moments, *as if* it could still exist.

Only in this form, if necessity dictates, can Dartington *appear* in the home of its assassin in Cornwall—as a spectre, a spirit of revolt and *radical* resistance to any form of alienation, intellectual rationalization, and bureaucratized pedagogy that reveals itself there: a ghost in the machine, ripping apart its gears. Yet such apparitions are not confined to Falmouth, they can appear anywhere and everywhere where the name of Dartington is known, or where it can be introduced. We need only to discover and learn the requisite spells.

This brings us, full circle, to the beginning of my text, to my initial question: *how* do we evoke, even as a ghost, what Dartington *was*, avoiding broad generalizations which are meaningless because abstract—evoking it with the right details, in the right contexts, to unleash, however indirectly, its ability to *change the way that people live*?

I have attempted already to lay the groundwork for my own response—and my own response, which in the broadest sense must be my life itself, can only be a drop in the bucket. As Dartington was a collective entity, its necromancy must be a collective effort. If the problems seem almost insurmountable, nothing could have prepared us better to overcome them than Dartington itself: our tools are analysis and action. I outlined many pages ago a number of strategies through which the ethos and tradition of Dartington has always perpetuated itself, and in the intervening paragraphs I have attempted to begin to adapt certain of them to the situation into which we are currently plunging. Let me now turn my analysis, by way of example, to another small, legendary school which has long since passed into history, whose participants have had substantial involvement with Dartington in the past, and which even before the college's danger fully revealed was often discussed as a model for the project of the estate: Black Mountain.

Most of those reading this text, Dartingtonians or otherwise, will be familiar with the Black Mountain School, for it has somehow touched nearly every mode of creative activity engaged in by either the Dartington or mOnocle-Lash communities. To the extent that you, or I, am *not* familiar with the details or the legacy of the place, take note: it is vital that we ask ourselves, over the coming years and decades, what we *don't* know, and why. Because Dartington is next. The fact is that Black Mountain—which none of

us attended, few if any have heard first-hand accounts of, and few of us, probably, have actively studied (though it might be a good idea)—has remained in our discourse, served as support and context for our own progressive experiment and others, and continues to act as an example that *such things can be*. The way in which this has happened is no doubt imperfect, but it is instructive; and that is no small thing. *How* do we know whatever we *do* know about the Black Mountain School?

Like Dartington, Black Mountain was fundamentally interdisciplinary, creating an atmosphere in which work was collaboratively produced from perspectives incorporating multiple fields of knowledge and technique—music, choreography, visual performance, theatre, painting, sculpture, literature, etc. It is scarcely surprising that students and faculty emerged from their time there to fundamentally change what was happening in the most deeply engaged milieus of their respective disciplines, and foster greater understanding within them of intersections and canons of other areas of radical activity. As a result a number of different awarenesses of the Black Mountain project have taken hold in an array of progressive communities, infiltrating every subset of cultural activity.

Likewise, this focus on collaboration and interdisciplinarity, bolstered by a more-or-less genuinely intellectual climate, made Black Mountain an essential force in the formation or growth of a number of movements, collectives, and emergent tendencies organized around social and ideological rather than formal or disciplinary priorities. Thus there are Black Mountain myths at play in Fluxus, in Concrete Music, of Happenings, just as there is a Dartington myth at play in Neoism, in SPART, in Post-NeoAbsurdism, etc.

Those who passed through Black Mountain recognized its singularity and the indispensable role that it had played in how they approached their practices and lives, and in all of their respective communities and discourses they let people know it. They talked about the Place, what it had been and what it had done; they made it an unavoidable part of *their own* work, of *their own* persona and myths. They made others wish they had been there and, by extension, made others *wish to re-create it*. Because there were at least as many versions of what Black Mountain had been as there were people who had passed through it, as many ways of encountering its legend as there were communities in which it circulated and people to hear or read the stories, it was endlessly adaptable to the goals and visions of those who took encouragement from it. When these people, inspired in part by its example, have looked outside their home disciplines and communities to discover the school again through different perspectives and priorities, the frisson produced has broadened and deepened their understandings of what pedagogy could be.

The presence of such examples, continually circulated and adapted as part of constantly emergent fields of *practice*, underscores not only the desirability but the practical feasibility of utopian education. If the forms of these examples as they infiltrate and traverse creative communities are well conceived, they can serve moreover as test cases for the strategies employed, successfully and otherwise, to bring about and sustain transformatory cultural moments. As I have suggested above, if carefully designed and

conscientiously passed on they can communicate not merely a 'state of mind' or vague principles of experimentation but the strategies necessary to build a *genuine* community committed to organizing life in such a way that radical projects can take root there, erecting a social space founded in mutual challenge and generosity.

Before taking leave of my example, we should also note certain ways in which the transmission of the Black Mountain myth has fallen short of this potential. Most glaring is its too-exclusive emphasis on 'big names', by which I mean names that have since accumulated cultural capital in the more commercialized or spectacular regions of experimental practice, the various 'art worlds'. Some of these big names belong to practitioners of questionable integrity and intellectual value, while others are genuinely respectable, their currency in superficial artistic circles merely the slag of their wide-ranging influence. Either way, the use of such names as a convenient shorthand reinforces all of the most damagingly institutional aspects of a school culture—emphasising hierarchical tenancies, hailing phallic 'heroes' while marginalizing the communal nature of the project, and sweeping aside the necessity for the kind of detail necessary for any analysis to be carried out by the listeners and readers. Such an approach would be more deadly yet to Dartington, though such names could be evoked, for the way in which the Dartington community worked both internally and in its relation to broader cultural activity was more diffused, less masculine and spectacular, which is also to say less *commercial* in structure and appeal, and partly for these reasons was more sustainable than Black Mountain, which lasted much less time and had far fewer relationships with experimental activity and thought outside the purely 'creative' domains. Also sadly missing from the Black Mountain legend as it has been passed down to me, whether or not the school itself, is its relationship to the local North Carolina community in the midst of which, or beside which, it existed. A conception of Dartington without Totnes and the surrounding communities of Devon would, as I have expressed, constitute a fatally distorted picture of what Dartington was and how it operated. Black Mountain comes down to us, truly or falsely, as a community sadly out of touch with Place. Another set of questions which I find unanswered—I do not say *unanswerable*—revolves around the practical institutional aspects of the school; that it operated on a negligible budget is well-known; *how* it did so and *why it ended* has not made it into the legends I have heard, though answers are probably to be found in the several books on the school. I stress that I am not comparing the schools *themselves* here, but examining the Black Mountain *myth* in one of its oral forms with what I hope its Devonshire counterpart might become.

In what forms might we conclude, then, can Dartington most effectively pass into history and myth as a perpetually active and adaptable force?

These forms must, first off, be *multiple* and interlocking. While macrohistories of the school can be useful and desirable, such a project could not be self-sufficient; its value would be in examining the specifically institutional aspects of the college's existence, and helping to coordinate and contextualize the

numerous memoirs, stories, and finely-targeted analyses of the community that are the only way to present the heterogeneous texture which was the genesis of Dartington's radical potential. All of us concerned with not only preserving but reproducing the ethos of the Place must firmly examine our particular relation to it, our place within it, and its relationship to the specific communities within which we work and the concerns and perspectives informing the praxis of these communities; from these considerations will emerge the forms—stories, analyses, memoirs, histories, etc.—that will best respond to the particular relevance of what Dartington was to those enclaves of cultural work with which each of us is most intimately concerned. In whatever form, they must be detailed and analytic. The overriding concern in the conceptualization and design of all of these endeavours must be their *use-value* within the particular discourses and communities into which they are introduced, their ability to instigate, enable, and sharpen concrete *action* of the kind that Dartington fostered in life.

The result will be innumerable micro-histories speaking to different communities and networks, different disciplinary and ideological concerns, emanating from and focusing on the various innumerable social nodes and intermingling groups that have charted out the coordinates of Dartington's heterogeneous body. Just as in practice these groups were inseparable from each other in the life of the place, the inevitable overlap, dove-tailing and shared concerns that these accounts will offer with each other will provide a disembodied corpus of Dartington at once comprehensive and particular, fully articulated while endlessly navigable and malleable by present and future generations capable of following and constructing full-bodied pictures of the project, and of *using* these understandings in order to more effectively undertake projects which even we at present find unimaginable—allowing Dartington to remain in death, as it was in life, something greater than any or all of us, capable of endless generation and invention.

In order to ensure that such navigation and collation of Dartington's traces remains possible, we must all remain aware of each others' various efforts in this direction. We should establish forums for this kind of cross-distribution in whatever forms appear appropriate: cross-publication in each others' journals and presses, collections and directories of material on Dartington online and through various archives and libraries, distribution of relevant publications by each others' small and micro-presses, events aimed at the continued and focused interaction of the Dartington diaspora, continued solidarity among movements, groups, venues, presses, projects, programmes, and institutions rooted in the Dartington project.

Another area of possible action which is well worth investigation and may already be in the works somewhere, would be a shadow school. While the estate itself will remain in the hands of the Trust, employed to their own ends, such a solution would offer the continued existence of the Dartington ethos *in* Totnes and Devon, helping to prevent the complete eventual diminution of the community there which has been cut off from the stream of new blood and the continually emergent educational culture for which the school provided a conduit. Dartington as we have known it might in this way at least be put on life-support,

especially if supported or involved with alumni, ex-faculty, programmes, and institutions now being settled in the surrounding cities.

One example of how such an undertaking can succeed is that of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Another small institution with a long tradition of radical pedagogy and experimental culture, closely integrated like Dartington with the rural community which hosted it, Antioch underwent a parallel struggle and contested closure near the same time as Dartington's. A well-organized shadow school was established in the wake of the closure, with extensive support by ex-faculty, alumni, the local community and the village council; after several years, concerted efforts by all of these parties succeeded in the re-opening of Antioch as a fully accredited institution once more. The way in which this happened has not been without major problems, but shows that such an undertaking is possible when, as in Totnes, overwhelming support for such a project exists in nearly all quarters.

The Yellow Springs project is an excellent example of the strategies I have suggested for perpetuating the practical use-value of an educational community's legacy, and anyone interested in the details of their campaign to revive the school can find them at: <http://www.theantiochpapers.org/> The amount of detailed information is immense; I myself have not yet been able to sort through it. Not only is it chillingly reminiscent in many aspects of the situation at Dartington, it provides an amazingly thorough basis for examining the practical strategies of that community's struggle. It also underscores the importance, in *this* type of project, for some central and organized body; the atomized approach I have suggested for perpetuating Dartington's *memory* would not be adequate for any attempt at its *resurrection*. It was precisely the lack of any *head* to coordinate and direct the community's anger, in light of the spineless acquiescence of the Student Union who had the duty of stepping into this role as they had done twenty years earlier, which blunted the Dartington community's own efforts to stop this from happening in the first place.

My direct participation in such an effort is forestalled by my own lack of EU membership, though I would offer any services possible from my current position and, should circumstances change and UK residence become practically feasible, give my full energies to such an endeavour. In the meantime I leave the idea—which would admittedly entail a degree of mostly thankless work and perseverance unfair to ask of anyone in such a text as this—on the table, should any foolhardy and heroic group of people pick it up. At the moment I can only prepare to do what I can, where I am, with what I have—which, if we all do the same, can at the least ensure that Dartington does not lie easy in the grave into which has been lowered, and will continue to haunt others as it will haunt all of those whom it has touched; that in the wake of its *body*, which will decay with our generation, there will persist a legacy of action and rigour simultaneously intellectual and real, a constant source of both the spirit and the tools of collective generation, a utopic no-place from which transformatory projects can always continue to be born.

This pamphlet is my first step; there shall be others.







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